

An Open Letter to Andy Stern and the Leadership of SEIU:

As student labor activists, we have a deep commitment to social and economic justice. We believe in solidarity with workers on our campuses, in our communities, and around the world to support efforts by workers to improve their own lives. This belief is both the reason we have supported workers struggle to organize with SEIU and the reason we must express deep concern with recent actions by SEIU leadership that have actually hurt workers' ability to improve their lives or even join a union at all.

We appreciate that more workers have united in SEIU to improve their lives than in any other union in the last 10 years. We thank you for your solidarity in campaigns by our campus groups to change the apparel industry, support workers struggles to form unions on and off campus, in the United States and around the world, and to support workers' fights for living wages on campus.

Unfortunately, over the last few years, we have begun to see a disturbing pattern developing in SEIU's relationship with students and campus workers. It is becoming increasingly clear that SEIU leaders often see students and campus workers as little more than pawns to use as they see fit. SEIU has sought to maneuver these pawns in a way that brings new members and dues into the union in the short term but keeps workers in poverty and actually hurts our collective efforts to help unions grow at a massive scale. The following are our first hand experiences that illustrate the problems we now face:

Stanford University & Santa Clara University – Santa Clara and Stanford Universities subcontract dining services to Bon Appétit, a company owned by Compass Group which has a national agreement with SEIU. The Bon Appétit employees at these campuses used to be members of SEIU Local 715, but in 2007, SEIU transferred them into Service Workers United (a joint union local of SEIU and UNITE HERE). This transfer was part of a massive restructuring of SEIU in California and these workers had no effective voice in this process and received little information about it.

Since being transferred into SWU, workers have received little to no support from SWU organizers as they have sought to enforce and improve their contract with support from students and SEIU Local 2007, the local union that represents other Stanford and Santa Clara University workers (these workers also used to be members of SEIU Local 715). Instead of offering help, SWU staff told workers that disputes will be handled at the corporate level. For example, when Bon Appétit changed workers' health insurance to a more expensive and less accessible plan, workers contacted the SWU "Member Resource Center," an out-of-town call center established as a lower cost alternative to replace union organizers and representatives. For months the workers were unable to get a response or an explanation for the cost increases. Ultimately, they were told by SWU staff that management had the right to do this. In addition, Santa Clara Bon Appétit workers have been asking since January about negotiations for their contract, which expires in

August 2008. To this date, SWU still has not answered them about what role, if any, workers will have in negotiations.

University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill - In 2005, SEIU leaders asked UNC students and campus foodservice workers employed by Aramark to join a national campaign to form a union of Aramark workers. SEIU leaders assigned several organizers from SWU to work with students and workers at UNC on the campaign. Aramark harassed and intimidated union supporters in retaliation and hundreds of UNC students and workers rallied to support their cause.

When summer break came, the SWU organizers left, promising to return the following year. They never did. After weeks of unreturned phone calls, students and workers learned that SEIU leaders had cut a deal with Aramark. This agreement made sure that only a small percentage of workers across the country would become members of the union and that those workers would not receive significant improvements in wages and benefits. Even worse, the deal ensured UNC workers could not join SEIU by letting Aramark decide which workers could join the union. Not surprisingly, UNC workers didn't make Aramark's list.

University of California – Irvine – In 2005, food service workers at UC-Irvine began organizing their union with AFSCME Local 3299. These workers were employed by Aramark, a subcontractor hired by the University. Together with their union and students, these workers followed Local 3299's proven strategy of pressuring the University to kick Aramark off campus and let these workers join Local 3299 as direct UC employees. A super majority of workers had signed a petition in support of organizing and hundreds of students participated in actions to hold the University accountable.

In January of 2006, at the height of the campaign, organizers from SEIU began visiting workers at their homes and trying to sign them up on cards to join Service Workers United. These organizers told workers that the organizer they had been working with had been fired and that they were from "largest union in the country." The workers quickly responded by contacting their organizer and coworkers and spread the word not to sign up with the "new union." It was clear that Aramark had invited SEIU to Irvine and provided them addresses for the workers. This blatant effort by Aramark to undermine the workers efforts is not surprising, but SEIU's complicity is appalling.

In September 2006, workers won their struggle and were hired directly by UC-Irvine. They overcame the opposition of the University Administration and Aramark as well as the direct interference by SEIU to become members of Local 3299. They are now part of a statewide master contract with 20,000 other University of California employees that gives them greater wages and benefits, and most importantly greater power, than the deal SEIU leaders made with Aramark would ever have allowed.

We have heard stories of SEIU leaders in Washington cutting other deals that harm workers' struggles to form unions and that lock workers into poverty wages with few or no benefits. We hope other students and workers will step forward to tell their story. And we hope you will listen to their story and lead SEIU in a better direction.

Therefore, in solidarity we call on SEIU to:

- Fight for a better deal with Aramark, Compass and other multi-service contractors that let workers – not the corporations -- decide for themselves if they want to join SEIU.
- Support workers' fight to win real progress towards a living wage and affordable health benefits. Ensure that subcontracted workers are also able to achieve these goals by uniting them with other campus workers.
- Stop using students and campus workers as pawns in corporate campaigns. Treat us as partners by giving us a voice in joint campaigns and supporting the campaigns of working students to improve their own lives and fights to make higher education more accessible.
- Respect union democracy and guarantee that workers have a voice in major decisions about their union, including mergers or transfers.
- Guarantee that workers, such as those at Santa Clara University, have a voice in bargaining their contracts, including electing their bargaining committee and approving contract proposals.
- Guarantee the rights of union members to speak out about the direction of their union without fear of retaliation.

We hope you make these changes so that we can work together to support the struggles of more workers than ever before to improve their lives by forming unions.

In Solidarity,

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